

How We Got the Bible

Lesson 8 - The Text of the Old Testament and the Ancient Versions of the Old Testament

INTRODUCTION

1. Aim: To explain how we can have confidence in the Hebrew Text of the Old Testament.
2. The number and the age of the Old Testament manuscripts are not as impressive as that of the New Testament,
3. But the manuscripts are of great enough quality to give us as equal a confidence in the text of the Old Testament as of the New Testament
4. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has helped in making sure that the text of the Old Testament is accurate.

Discussion

I. THE Hebrew Manuscripts - The main manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible

A. Aleppo Codex

1. It ranks first in the Hebrew Manuscripts.
2. Dated 10th cent. A.D.
3. Formerly, a complete Hebrew Bible, housed at the synagogue in Aleppo, Syria
4. Partially destroyed by Arab mobs rioting at the U.N.'s decision to establish a Jewish state (Dec. 2, 1947)
5. Smuggled to Jerusalem
6. The basis of the new critical edition of the Hebrew Bible

B. Leningrad Codex

1. Complete Hebrew Bible - of equal rank with the Aleppo Codex
2. Dated A.D. 1010 - written in Cairo - beautiful manuscript
3. Located at the National Library of St. Petersburg, Russia
4. Representing the Ben Asher family of manuscripts
5. Along with the Aleppo Codex
6. Both models of the Massoretic Text

C. Cairo Codex

1. Containing both Former and Latter Prophets
2. Dated A.D. 895

3. Written by Moses ben Asher
4. It was carried off by the Crusaders and later returned.
5. Located with the Karaite community of Cairo

D. Leningrad Codex of the Prophets

1. Dated A.D. 916
2. Includes Isa., Jer., Ezek., and the Minor Prophets

E. British Museum Codex of the Pentateuch

1. Dated 10th cent. A.D.
2. Contains most of the Pentateuch

F. Note on the difference in textual history of the O.T.:

1. Jewish scribes followed meticulous copying procedures
2. They gave old, worn-out manuscripts ceremonial burials
3. Their motive was to prevent the improper use of the material on which the sacred name of God had been inscribed.
4. Before burial, the faulty manuscripts were hidden away in a “genizah” which was a storeroom for manuscripts that were unusable.
5. This practice has deprived us of early Hebrew manuscripts which we might have had to use.

II. Early scribal activity

- A. Early school of professional scribes (1 Chr. 2:55) “And the families of the scribes which dwelt at Jabez; the Tirathites, the Shimeathites, and Suchathites. These are the Kenites that came of Hemath, the father of the house of Rechab.”
1. These were schools of professional scribes who were trained in the art of writing. They became specialists in the law and were the supreme guardians of the text.
 2. The minute details for copying text
 3. Unusual letter sizes carefully duplicated
 4. Questioned words or letters still copied, though noted with a dot above them

- B. Such longstanding tradition (massorah) gave rise to the school of scribes known as the Massoretes
1. Started about A.D. 500
 2. The most famous Massoretes were of Tiberias
 3. Manuscripts associated with the Ben Asher family of Tiberias were the most renowned
 4. Contributions of the Massoretes
 - a. Developed a system of inserting vowels onto the text without disturbing the text
 - b. Developed safeguards and strict standards which insured the purity of the text
 - c. Counted letters, words, and verses of each book
 - d. Counted middle letters, words and verses of various sections, such as the Pentateuch, the Psalms, and the Hebrew Bible
 - e. Consequently, our Hebrew text today is known as the Massoretic Text
- C. Present status of our text
1. With a few exceptions, our earliest Hebrew manuscripts date no farther back than the ninth century.
 2. Even before the time of Massoretes the Jewish scribes were seeking perfection in the transcription of the text
 3. The detailed instructions found in the Talmud (Jewish civil and religious law, A.D. 200-500): is an example.
 4. "A synagogue roll must be written on the skins of clean animals, prepared for the particular use of the synagogue by a Jew. These must be fastened together with strings taken from clean animals. Every skin must contain a certain number of columns, equal throughout the entire codex. The length of each column must not extend over less than forty-eight, or more than sixty lines; and the breadth must consist of thirty letters. The whole copy must first be lined; and if three words be written in it without a line, it is worthless. The ink should be black, neither red, green, nor any other colour and be prepared according to a definite recipe. An authentic copy must be the exemplar, from which the transcriber ought not in the least to deviate. No word or letter, not even a yod, must be written from memory, the scribe not having looked at the codex before him.... Between every consonant the space of a hair or

thread must intervene; between every word the breadth of a narrow consonant; between every new parashah, or section, the breadth of nine consonants; between every book, three lines. The fifth book of Moses must terminate exactly with a line; but the rest need not do so. Besides this, the copyist must sit in full Jewish dress, wash his whole body, not begin to write the name of God with a pen newly dipped in ink, and should a king address him while writing that name he must take no notice of him.... The rolls in which these regulations are not observed are condemned to be buried in the ground or burned; or they are banished to the schools, to be used as reading books.” (Frederic Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, rev. A.W. Adams [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), pp. 78-79)

5. These strict regulations helped guarantee the accurate transmission of the Old Testament text.
6. Available evidence points to the Massoretic type of text as the Hebrew Bible from before Jesus' day

III. The Dead Sea Scrolls

- A. Discovered in March, 1948, by a Bedouin boy looking for lost sheep, in caves above the ancient community of Qumran at the NW side of the Dead Sea
- B. The original seven scrolls
 1. Acquired by Metropolitan Mar Athanasius Yeshue Samuel of the Syrian Orthodox Monastery of St. Mark in Jerusalem
 2. The Book of Isaiah -54 columns of text on a leather scroll
 3. A Manual of Discipline-rules for a Jewish community (Essenes?) living by the Dead Sea
 4. A commentary on the Book of Habakkuk
 5. A work known as “the Genesis Apocryphon”
 6. Acquired by Professor E.L. Sukenik of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem
 7. A part of the Book of Isaiah
 8. A work entitled, “the War of the Sons of Light with the Sons of Darkness”
 9. A collection of thanksgiving hymns

- C. Qumran inhabited from the 2nd cent. B.C. to the 1st cent. A.D.

- D. Currently over 800 scrolls and thousands of fragments found; 200 of the O.T.
 - 1. Psalms-36
 - 2. Deuteronomy-29
 - 3. Isaiah-21
 - 4. Exodus-17
 - 5. Genesis-15

- E. The great Isaiah scroll (1QIsa)
 - 1. Dated ca. 100 B.C.
 - 2. Complete copy except for a few breaks
 - 3. Primary differences with the Massoretic Text: changes in
 - a. Spelling
 - b. Grammar
 - c. Modification of vocabulary
 - 4. Note: the Isaiah scroll reflects a “newer” text than what is found in the Massoretic Text

- F. A second Isaiah scroll (1QIsb)
 - 1. Contains many chapters from Isa. 41-59
 - 2. Dated from the last half of the 1st cent. B.C.
 - 3. Evidence that the Massoretic Text was in existence in pre-Christian times, 1,000 years earlier than our oldest previous Hebrew manuscripts

- G. An Exodus scroll (4QpaleoExm)
 - 1. Written in an old Hebrew script, paleo-Hebrew
 - 2. Dated early part of 2nd cent. B.C.
 - 3. 40 columns of an original 57
 - 4. Reflects readings more like the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Greek Septuagint

- H. Two Samuel Scrolls
 - 1. 4QSama
 - a. Dated from the 1st cent. B.C.

- b. Contains fragments on about 10% of 1 & 2 Sam.
- 2. 4QSamb
 - a. Dated as early as 3rd cent. B.C.
 - b. Contains several chapters of 1 Sam
 - c. Character: Both agree mostly with the Greek Septuagint

IV. Conclusion

- A. Differences among the scrolls are reflected as well in O.T. quotations found in the N.T., some being from the Hebrew O.T., some from the Septuagint, some from other variations of the Hebrew O.T.
- B. Differences among the scrolls are mainly differences in spelling or other minor differences, not affecting the overall message of the text
- C. Most of the manuscripts found near the Dead Sea and even in the Judean desert agree with the Massoretic Text
 - 1. Even the great Isaiah scroll (1QIsa) demonstrates insignificant differences with the Massoretic Text, e.g., Isa. 6 has only three variants of note
 - 2. "They were calling" instead of "one called to another" (v. 3)
 - 3. "Holy, holy" instead of "holy, holy, holy" (v. 3)
 - 4. "Sins" instead of "sin" (v. 7)
- D. Bleddyn J. Roberts-"...the authenticity of the Massoretic text stands higher than at any time in the history of modern textual criticism, a standpoint which is based on a better assessment of the history of the Jewish transmission" ("The Old Testament: Manuscripts, Text and Versions" in The Cambridge History of the Bible: Volume 2: The West from the Fathers to the Reformation [ed. G.W.H. Lampe; Cambridge: University Press, 1969], p. 26)

V. THE ANCIENT VERSIONS: OLD TESTAMENT

- A. Introduction: the value of the versions
 - 1. Reveal a kind of text prior to the appearance of the Massoretic Text
 - 2. Help clarify or complement defective readings in the Massoretic Text
 - 3. Increase the credibility of the Massoretic Text

B. Samaritan Pentateuch

1. Not a translation but a form of the Hebrew text
2. Dated 200 B.C., however traced back to 400 B.C.
 - a. Samaritans built a temple on Mt. Gerizim
 - b. Only the Pentateuch considered authoritative; rest of O.T. rejected for praising Jerusalem and Zion
3. Of the nearly 6,000 variants, only a few are significant
 - a. After the listing of the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20 and Deut. 5), a long passage is inserted commanding that an altar be built on Mt. Gerizim
 - b. Mt. Ebal changed to Mt. Gerizim (Deut. 27:4)
 - c. Overall, the Samaritan Pentateuch confirms the Hebrew Pentateuch

C. Aramaic Targums

1. Paraphrases of the Hebrew Scriptures (cf. Neh. 8:5-8)
2. Aramaic became the spoken language of the Jews during the Babylonian exile
3. Synagogue practice
 - a. Read from the Hebrew Scriptures; “preach” in Aramaic
 - b. Later, targums written down, then read in the synagogue
4. Two official targums
 - a. Targum Onkelos of the Pentateuch
 - b. Targum Jonathan of the Prophets
5. Examples of texts
 - a. “The sound of the Lord God walking in the garden” (Gen. 3:8) is paraphrased as “the sound of the word of the Lord God walking in the garden”
 - b. Mt. Sinai as “the mountain of God” (Exod. 3:1) is paraphrased as “the mountain upon which the glory was revealed”
 - c. Isaiah's words, “I saw the Lord” (Isa. 6:1) is paraphrased as “I saw the glory of the Lord” (cf. John 12:41)

D. Syriac Peshitta

1. Aramaic Targums written in the dialect of Western Aramaic; the dialect of Eastern Aramaic was Syriac

2. Only one version of the O.T. in Syriac survives, the Peshitta
3. Dated from the middle of the 1st cent. A.D.

E. Latin Vulgate

1. The Old Latin, while extremely valuable for the N.T., is weak on the O.T., being based on the Greek Septuagint; however Jerome's Latin Vulgate was based on the original Hebrew
2. Order of translated books
 - a. Samuel and Kings
 - b. Psalms
 - c. The Prophets and Job
 - d. Ezra and Chronicles
 - e. The remainder of the O.T.
3. Jerome's O.T. translation from Hebrew to Latin was harshly criticized
 - a. His "barking critics" from the preface to Job
 - b. His "helmeted preface" to Samuel and Kings
4. Excluded the Apocrypha from the Vulgate
 - a. Because there were only 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, therefore, 22 books (our 39) in the Hebrew O.T.
 - b. Vulgate retained the Old Latin version of the Apocrypha
5. Value of Jerome's O.T. translation-reflects a text nearly identical to the Massoretic Text

F. Septuagint

1. Known in the manuscripts as "according to the seventy [translators]," generally by its Latin name, "Septuagint"
2. Translation completed about 250 B.C.
3. The story told in the Letter of Aristeas to his brother, Philocrates
 - a. Pharaoh Ptolemy II (285-247 B.C.) commissioned a translation of the Jewish law for his royal library
 - b. Aristeas sent to Jerusalem
 - c. 72 translators-6 elders selected from each of the 12 tribes; though Aristeas only listed 70 by name
 - d. Translators brought to Alexandria
 - e. Translation "completed" in 72 days

- f. Read and accepted by the Jews in Alexandria
- g. Question for scholars: How much of the letter is legend?
- 4. Questions concerning the Septuagint
 - a. Was the original translation the Pentateuch only or all the O.T.?
 - b. Was there an original Septuagint or many "editions"?
 - c. How does the Septuagint relate to the Hebrew text?
 - (1) Different Greek translations of the O.T. in the ancient world may have influenced copies of the Septuagint
 - (2) There is substantial rearrangement of the text as compared to the Hebrew text in Exodus (chap. 35-40) and Jeremiah (chap. 46-51 after 25:13)
 - (3) Some of the Hebrew texts in the Dead Sea Scroll are more like the Septuagint than the Massoretic Text
 - (4) The Septuagint occasionally provides better readings than the original Hebrew; however, the text of the O.T. is primarily from Hebrew manuscripts
 - d. How can the Septuagint be characterized?
 - (1) Sometimes wooden literalness; sometimes paraphrase
 - (2) The Pentateuch is a carefully done translation, reflecting the vocabulary of 3rd-2nd cent. B.C. Egypt
- 5. Influence of the Septuagint
 - a. By way of the Latin Vulgate
 - (1) Names in English Bible for the books of the Pentateuch
 - (2) The grouping of the O.T. books: Law, History, Poetry, Prophets
 - b. Initially the only Bible of the early church
 - (1) Used for most of the O.T. quotes found in the N.T.
 - (2) Much of the language of the N.T. comes from the Septuagint
 - (a) "Apostle"
 - (b) "Atonement"
 - (c) "Covenant"
 - (d) "Faith"
 - (e) "Forgiveness"
 - (f) "Glory"
 - (g) "Law"

- (h) "Peace"
 - (i) "Redemption"
 - (j) "Righteous-ness"
 - (k) "Truth"
- c. The Greek Septuagint paved the way in language and vocabulary for the Gospel to reach a Greek-speaking world

Conclusion

1. What accounts for the differences in age between the earliest O.T. manuscripts and the earliest N.T. manuscripts?
2. What did the Massorettes do to maintain the integrity of the Hebrew Bible?
3. How important are the Dead Sea Scrolls?
4. What are the value and the drawback of the Septuagint?

Sources Consulted

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 2. Rocky Whitely Oldham Lane church of Christ Abilene, TX
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